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Reader's Digest

January 1963



HAPPY NEW YEAR

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1963

Reader's Digest

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Around the World, Almost, in 169 Days

The last survivor of the longest, maddest automobile race in history describes the almost incredible adventure.

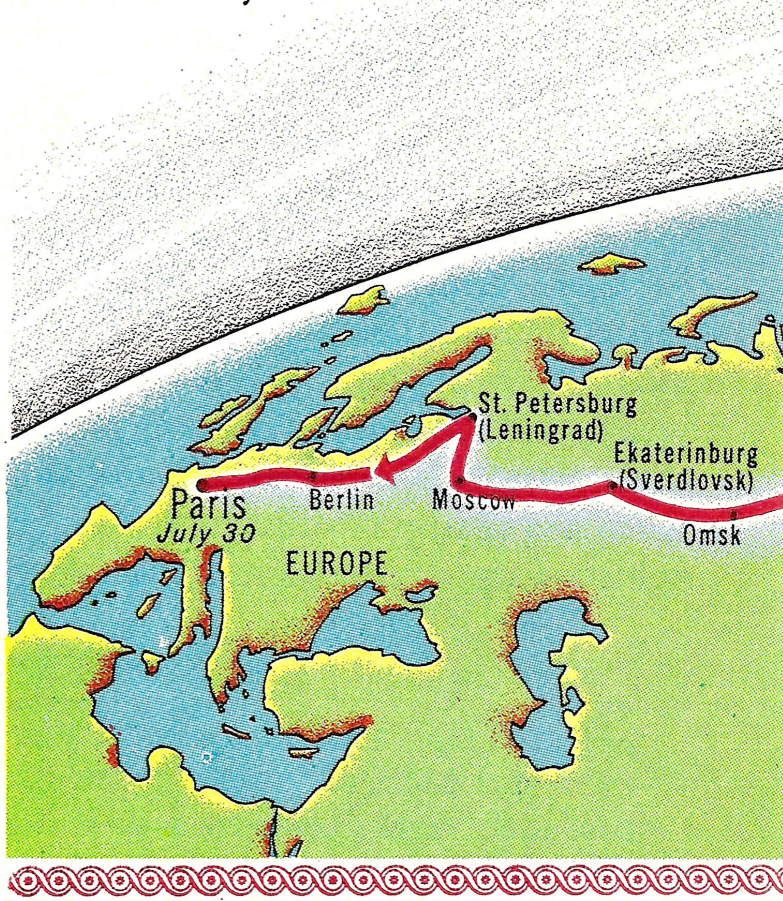
A Reader's Digest "First Person" award

BY GEORGE SCHUSTER

BACK IN 1908, the idea of an automobile race from New York to Paris was as fantastic as present space flights. Paved highways were almost unknown, road maps nonexistent, tires fragile, cars frail. Nevertheless, six cars and a score of men competed in such a race. I was one of those men, and today I remember nearly every mile of the mad adventure.

At the time I was 35, and earning \$25 a week road-testing Thomas Flyers for the E. R. Thomas Motor Car Co., in Buffalo, N. Y. The race was sponsored by a Paris newspaper, *Le Matin* (which a year earlier had sponsored a Peking-to-Paris race*), and by the New York *Times*. Prizes consisted of several trophies offered by auto clubs and others, modest cash awards, and the chance to dem-

onstrate just what a car could do. Entrants would drive from New York to San Francisco. From there the cars would be shipped to Alaska, whence they would be driven down



*See "The 'Impossible' Race From Peking to Paris," The Reader's Digest, January '58.

the frozen Yukon River, across Bering Strait, then through Siberia and Europe to Paris. To be sure of ice on the Yukon, the race had to start in winter.

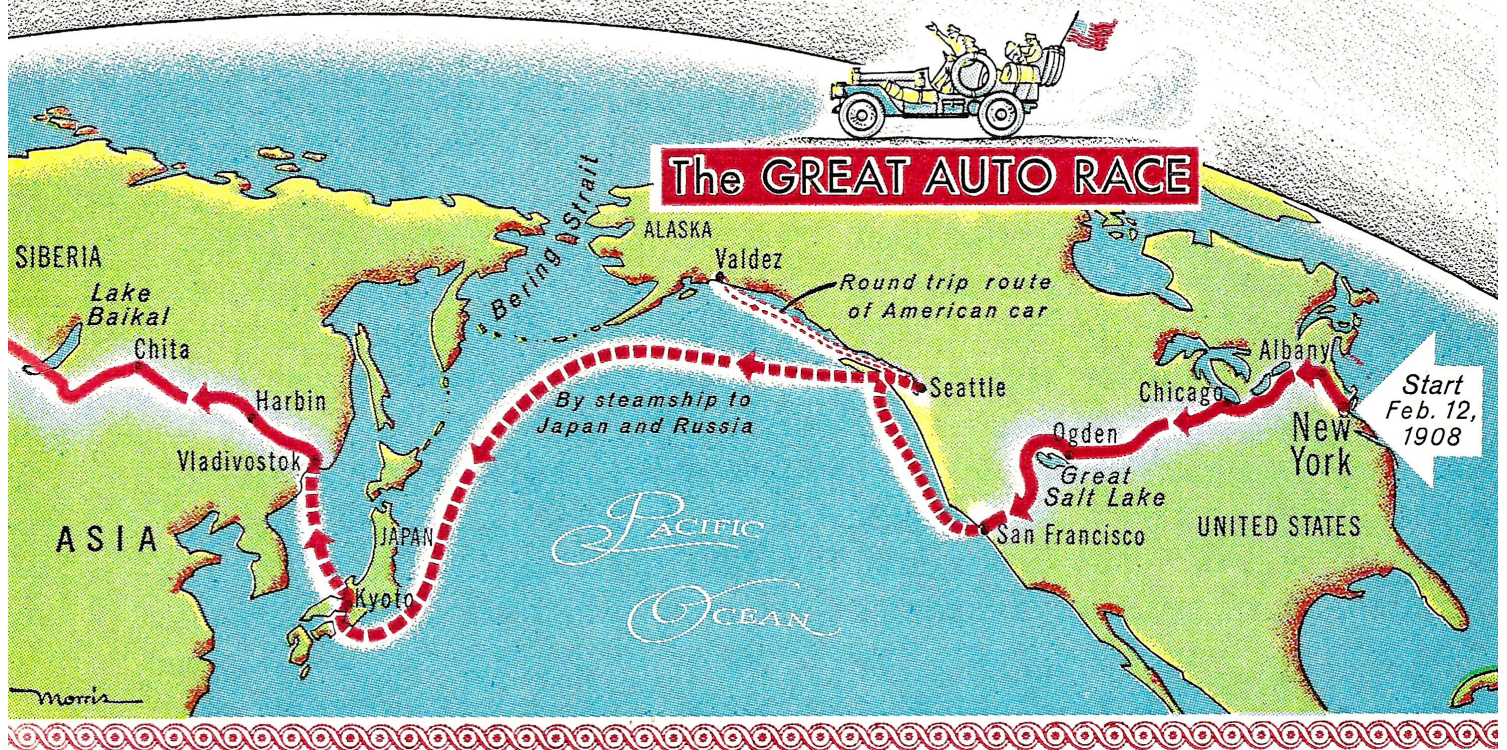
Montague Roberts, a 25-year-old driver for the Thomas agency in New York, first proposed that we enter. He would drive the car, and I would "keep it going." That would not be easy. Our \$4000 Thomas Flyer was a four-cylinder, 60-horsepower car which would do a mile a minute in a road test. But it went only about ten miles on a gallon of gasoline, and it used a troublesome chain drive when many rivals already had shaft drives. Moreover, no car had ever crossed the United States in winter.

Edwin Ross Thomas, head of our company, opposed our entering. But

on February 11, the day before the race was to start, our sales manager telephoned me. "Be in New York in the morning," he said. "You are going. Your salary will be doubled to \$50 a week."

A Lincoln's Birthday crowd of 250,000 jammed Times Square next day. Ours was the only American machine. Lined up against us were a French Motobloc, a French De Dion, an Italian Zusta, a German Protos and a one-cylinder French Sizaire-Naudin (driven by a veteran of the Peking-Paris race). Our gray Thomas Flyer roadster, 1907 model, had no top or windshield, but carried an iron frame over which canvas could be stretched. All the cars were loaded with gasoline, shovels, chains and ropes.

At 11:15 a.m. the president of the



Automobile Club of America fired a gold-plated pistol, and we banged up Broadway and northward over the Old Albany Post Road, now U.S. Highway 9.

We were supposed to reach Albany that day, but car after car got stuck in the thawing snow. ("I will win," said a Frenchman. "I shovel very hard.") The smallest car, the one-cylinder Sizaire-Naudin, broke its rear axle after two hours and, since spare parts were unavailable, dropped out of the race. Our engine soon was hitting on only three of its four cylinders, but we managed to be first into Hudson that night, 116 miles from New York. There I ground the valves of the faulty cylinder.

As we passed through Schenectady the next day, the fire alarm was sounded in our honor. There, however, fence-high snowdrifts blocked the road, so we switched to the wind-swept Erie Canal towpath. The De Dion and the Zust took turns with us breaking the way. After each bad drift I had to get under the car with a jack and straighten the rods that kept our driving chain adjusted. We reached Fonda at 10 p.m., after making 59 miles for the day. I drained the radiator to keep it from freezing—a nightly duty.

Fog stopped us for a while on the towpath to Utica, but before long we were churning through Syracuse and Auburn—until we had to be pulled from the mud by a four-horse team.

Next day a sharp drop in tempera-

ture froze the muddy roads, and we made fast time through Rochester and on to Buffalo. There, at the Thomas factory, men worked through the night replacing our bad cylinder and substituting a straight axle for the front drop axle, which was scraping snow. I asked Mr. Thomas for an additional man, and he gave us George Miller, one of the road testers.

Now the race became serious. The Thomas, De Dion and Zust were supposed to remain in Buffalo a day for an Automobile Club dinner, but the Zust sped on west. The dinner was canceled, and we all took off after the Italians.

Because of a blizzard, it took us eight days to reach Chicago, and Roberts, our driver, lost 20 pounds. Mud now replaced snow as we chugged westward, following roughly the route of present U.S. Highway 30 through Illinois, Iowa and Nebraska. Many towns dismissed school so that children could see us. A newspaper described us as "fierce-looking, wild-eyed men who travel without sleep and without food." When we rolled into Cheyenne, Wyo., on March 8, we were met by an escort of cowboys, cowgirls and a band.

Here Roberts, under contract to drive in Eastern races, yielded the wheel to Linn Mathewson, the Thomas dealer in Denver. I was ordered to get a gun. "Wide-open country from here on," people said.

Facing cold, penetrating winds, we pushed on over winding moun-

tain roads in snow so deep, after we crossed the Continental Divide, that our chain-covered wheels often whirled helplessly. Finally Mathewson asked the Union Pacific for permission to drive on its tracks, and the railroad consented. Carrying orders classing us as a special train, we bumped westward with our right wheels on the outside ends of the ties, which caused endless blowouts.

At Ogden, Utah, we took the body off the chassis and replaced cracked countershaft housings for the third time. Also, Harold Brinker, a 21-year-old San Francisco driver, took the wheel from Mathewson. The Southern Pacific refused to let us drive over its tracks for fear we would break down and block the line; so, since there were no maps, we hired local guides and pushed on—with no idea of what had happened to the other cars.

At dusk one day in Nevada, we came to grief trying to climb the steep bank of a dry stream bed. The strain broke six teeth off the drive pinion and cracked the transmission case. I rented a horse at a nearby ranch and started for Tonopah, 75 miles ahead. After five hours I came to an adobe house and knocked.

"Don't try to come in here, mister," a woman inside replied. "You can find hay for your horse in the corral, and there's a lean-to for you." I fed the horse and lay down.

I awoke the next morning to find that three men had driven from Tonopah to meet us. With parts borrowed from a local doctor's Thomas

we repaired our car and drove across Death Valley after dark, then through sand to Stovepipe Wells. After three hours' rest in Ballarat, we sped through Mojave and Tehachapi to Bakersfield. That day's run of 382 miles was our best since leaving New York.

Next day, March 24, we reached San Francisco. It had taken us 41 days, 8 hours and 15 minutes to cross the country. The Motobloc had given up in Iowa; the Züst was in Utah; the De Dion and Protos were in Wyoming.

To get our car ready for Alaska and Siberia, we replaced the countershaft housings for the fourth time, added a brace to the frame, and replaced wheels, springs and transmission. We sailed north to Seattle, where my wife sent me a rifle and a shotgun, with a message from my son to bring him "a live monkey."

At sea, out of Seattle, I studied a 20-page memorandum on the possibilities of winter motoring in Alaska. There had been none, but the informant believed that dog trails could be widened sufficiently.

We landed at Valdez, Alaska, on April 8. The inhabitants welcomed us with a parade and banquet, but the snow was so deep we could not drive the Thomas off the dock. The next day, a telegram arrived: "Return to Seattle. Route changed to go Seattle to Vladivostok."

Back in Seattle on April 16, we learned that the Züst and the De Dion had already sailed for Japan. The Protos, which had been dam-

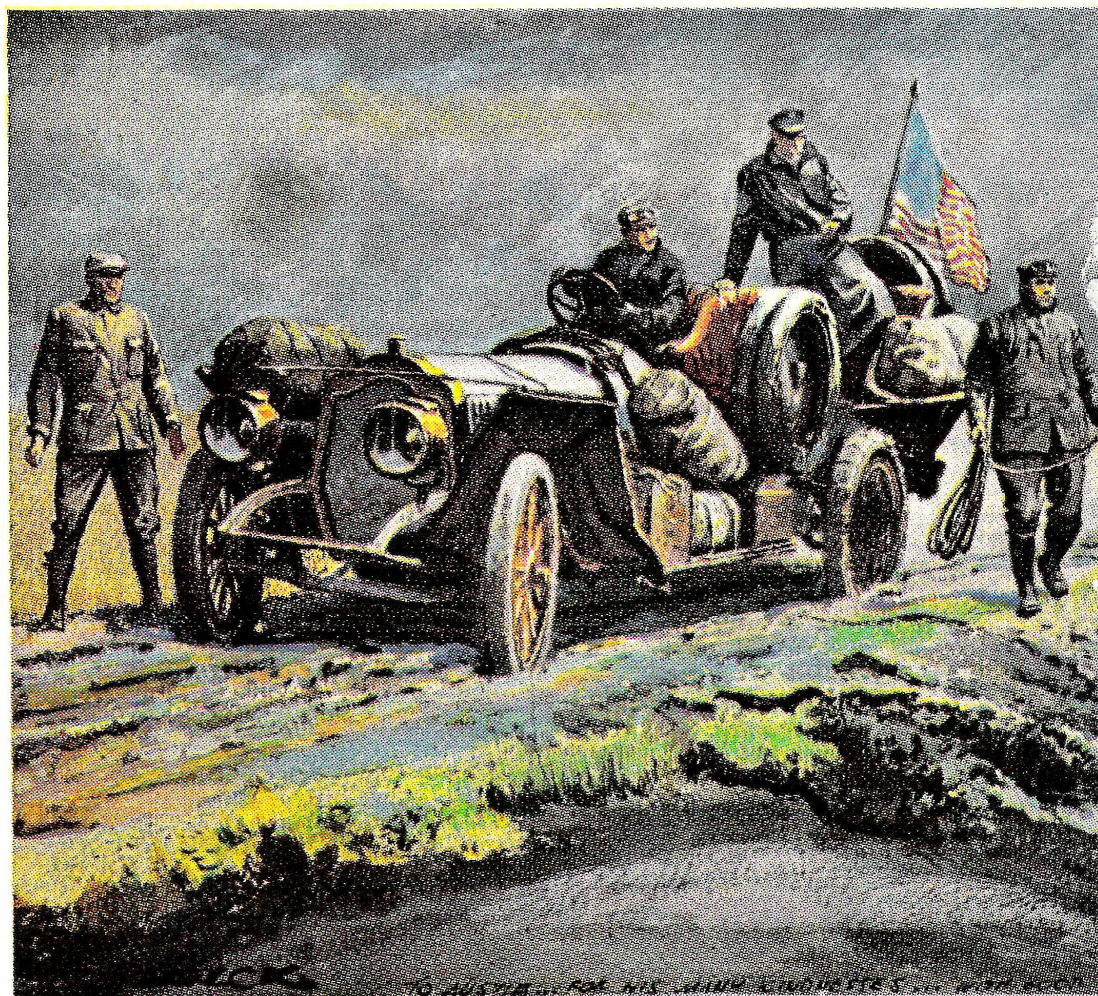
aged beyond local repair in Utah and shipped by rail to Seattle, sailed April 19 for Vladivostok. The Thomas and its crew—now consisting of George Miller, Hans Henry Hansen (a Norwegian arctic explorer who had switched from the De Dion to us) and myself—sailed two days later for Japan.

Arriving there, we obtained our Russian visas in Kyoto and then drove over some

300 miles of narrow, winding roads flanked by trees and flowers in full bloom, to Tsuruga, on the Japan Sea. On May 17, we embarked for Vladivostok.

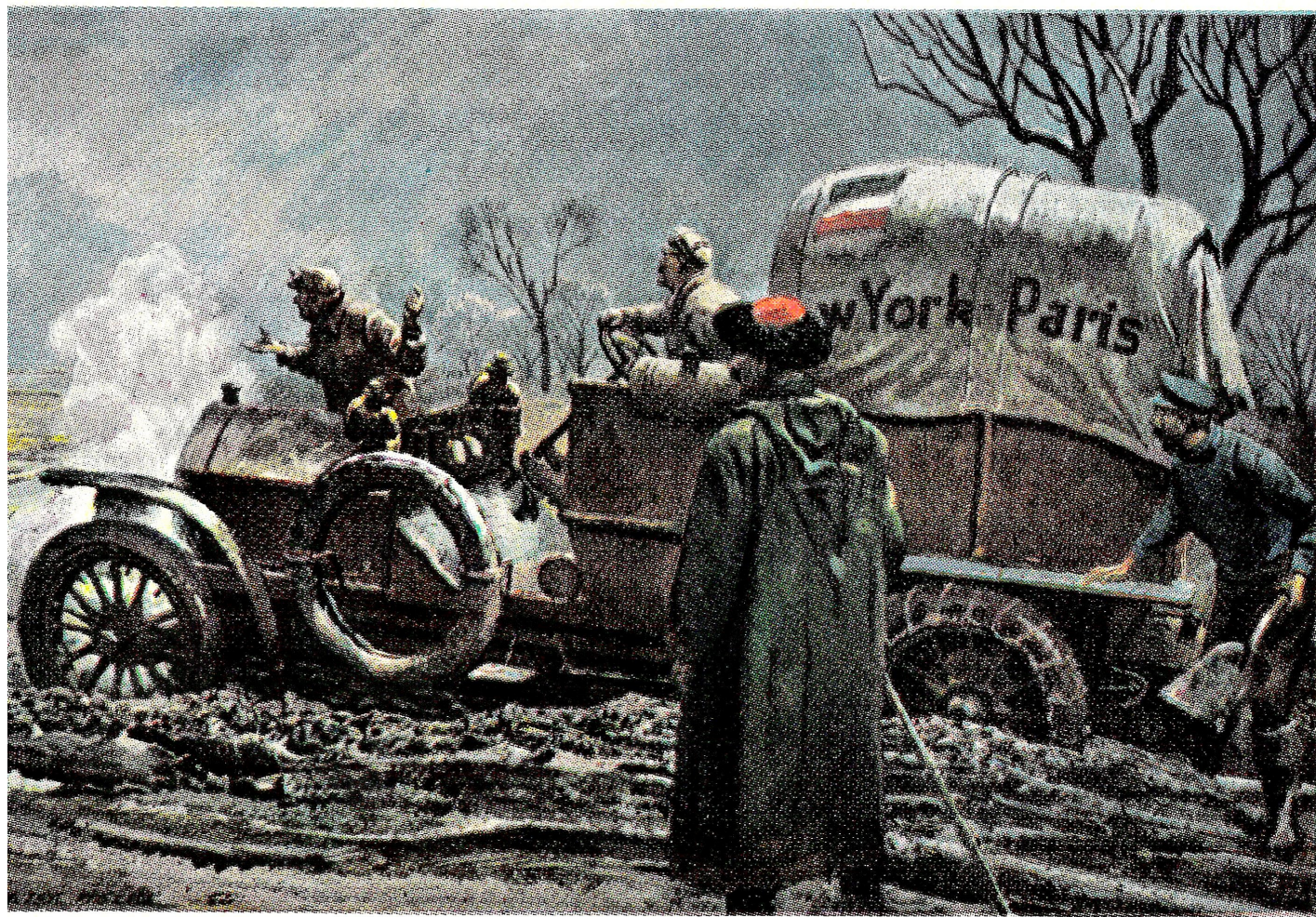
The three other cars were already there when we arrived, but the De Dion was being withdrawn by its manufacturer. The Zust withdrew from the race, too, but later decided to continue. Meanwhile, the race committee had given the Protos a 15-day penalty for failing to drive to San Francisco, and us a 15-day advantage to make up for the trip to Alaska.

After shipping gasoline and spare parts ahead on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, we left Vladivostok on



May 22. We hadn't gone more than 20 miles when we came up with the Protos, which had started two hours earlier. Only the tops of its rear wheels were above the mud. We passed the Germans our towrope and pulled the Protos to solid ground. Lt. Hans Koeppen, its driver, a handsome 31-year-old on leave from the German general staff, provided champagne in thanks for "a gallant, comradely act." That evening we were mired ourselves, and 40 Russian soldiers pulled us out.

We lived in the mud for days. Finally, the road became so impossible that we returned to Nikol'ski (now Voroshilov) to take to the



Trans-Siberian track. We discovered that the Protos had done this earlier and was again in the lead. As we bounced along, two tires blew out in rapid succession. We wore out four in 150 miles.

Four miles past the Manchurian border, the car stopped with a cracking sound. Six teeth had broken off the driving pinion, and oil was leaking from a six-inch crack in the transmission case. I jumped a train for Harbin. The trip required five days, but I picked up the parts I had ordered long before, and cabled the factory to send a complete transmission by way of Europe.

We continued over the railroad track to Harbin, and left there six

▲ *Near Vladivostok, Americans offer assistance to mired Germans*

days after the Protos. Sharing the trail with camels and donkeys, we made fast time across Manchuria into Western Siberia. We reached Chita just two days behind the Protos, which had won \$1000 from the local automobile club for being first into that city. With no other lubricant available, we bought 40 pounds of Vaseline to quiet our gears. Later we had to use tallow.

On the eastern edge of huge Lake Baikal, we caught up with the Protos, just after it had been loaded for ferrying. We were moments too late, however, to be put aboard the same

ferry, and we had to wait 12 hours.

On the west side of Baikal, we drove through two days and two nights. At one point, we came to a river with no ferry. Seeing a village a little upstream on the other side, we fired several shots. Soon some men appeared and, in response to our gestures, made a log raft. Almost invariably, the people we met were friendly. Once, however, we were greeted with stones, at a place where a car in the Peking-to-Paris race had killed a child.

On the morning of June 29, we spied a moving object ahead. "It must be the Protos!" I shouted.

Since I was driving at the time, I pushed our accelerator lever up, and we gradually overtook them. Despite the mud, the Thomas was making 30 miles an hour.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" we shouted as we sped by. Koeppen saluted us like an ancient Teutonic knight.

On July 1, we reached Omsk, 3408 miles from Vladivostok. A short distance beyond, we mired in a bog and heard the "crack, crack" of stripped gears. I returned to Omsk in a crude horse-drawn vehicle, and telegraphed various cities trying to locate the transmission we had ordered from Buffalo. I was in despair until word came from Miller that he had made some passable new teeth by driving in ordinary screws and filing them down.

Soon we were in the Ural Mountains, and on July 6 we rolled into ancient Ekaterinburg (now Sverd-

lovsk), where the Bolsheviks murdered Czar Nicholas II and his family in 1918. The Protos was four days behind us, and had a broken axle.

Three days later, our transmission failed on a steep grade. There was nothing to do but go 215 miles to Kazan, where I had learned the new transmission had arrived. By troika I traveled 430 miles in four and a half days, and we had our precious transmission. But the Protos had passed us.

On July 19, we reached Nizhnii Novgorod (now Gorki), where we ate and bathed. I had not taken my clothes or shoes off in 13 days. We reached St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) on July 22, and were made honorary members of the Automobile Club of Russia. But Koeppen, still ahead, had collected the club's monetary prizes.

Fighting sleep and fatigue, we crossed Germany to Berlin, where we arrived on July 26. There, Koeppen's father, a white-haired retired army colonel, informed us that the Protos had arrived in Paris the night before. He didn't know about the penalty against the Protos for failing to cross the United States, and he thought his son had won.

Our final "dash" began early on July 30, from Liège, in Belgium. We crossed into France at Fumay, then drove past the famous Rheims Cathedral and through Château-Thierry. Rolling at 50 miles an hour over cobblestone roads, we finally brought Paris in view. Crowds be-

gan to cheer us. People tossed flowers. Diners in sidewalk cafés raised their glasses and shouted, "*Vive la voiture Américaine!*"

Crowds jammed the Boulevard Poissonnière as we stopped in front of the office of *Le Matin* at 8 p.m. on July 30—169 days after leaving New York. With our credit for going to Alaska and the penalty against the Protos, the Thomas Flyer had won the longest race in history. Our speedometer was broken, but we figured we had traveled 13,341 miles—3246 more than the Protos. The Züst reached Paris on September 17. Weeks passed before the race committee decided officially in our favor, but we claimed victory at once, and

the French gave us a magnificent reception at the Grand Hotel.

I BELIEVE I am the only one still alive who took part in that race. I still have a driver's license, but at 89 I leave the driving to younger people. I have seen the automobile change from a rich man's summer plaything into everybody's year-round servant. I have seen the number of automobiles in the United States increase from none to more than 65 million. Great turnpikes and throughways now run where our Thomas Flyer struggled through mud, snow and sand. I like to think that our race back in 1908 helped a little to bring this about.

